

Management of invasive plants

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If one were to take many of the comments made about Japanese Knotweed literally, one could imagine that we are in a situation of Triffid like invasion. Questions such as, "How much concrete do I need to put down to stop Japanese Knotweed?" indicate a worrying lack of understanding.

The plant is extremely vigorous and has characteristics which enable it to survive in its native habitat where it is a primary coloniser of volcanic slopes. It is tolerant of heavy metals and also has the advantage that it is in this country without the organisms which provide some checks to its growth in its native zone. In general with other organisms, it will take advantage of any opportunity to expand.

Work has given some indication of the type and size of material which is capable of regeneration. Above ground stems have been shown to produce roots, particularly in moist conditions. Pieces of below ground material – technically largely underground stems rather than roots (less than half a gram in weight) – can produce new plants and small material has the potential for translocation by a variety of means. Dumping of garden waste on highway verges followed by an operation such as trenching is a classic method for the acceleration of spread of the plant and the potential for the transport of viable material to other locations on equipment such as tracked excavators is high. Flailing is also likely to lead to spread. The large quantity of below ground material, perhaps 30kg in a cubic metre in an established site, equivalent to twice the weight of the full summer top growth, provides some explanation of the surprisingly rapid rate of shoot growth, in excess of 100mm in 24 hours in some circumstances. Shoot material has been observed to appear from some sites after an absence of several years. Any form of disturbance is likely to lead to rapid regrowth.

The key to successful control is to take proper account of these factors and to consider the range of options which may be appropriate. With the emphasis on brownfield site redevelopment there is an increased likelihood that Japanese Knotweed may be encountered in these formerly used areas due to inappropriate disposal of materials and lack of maintenance often over a number of years.

The first essential is good, timely survey of the site on foot. This is likely to be a highly cost effective strategy in relation to many ecological issues, not simply Japanese Knotweed. Often I have had a call, "I've got this site which I've got to start on next week and I've just been told that I have Japanese Knotweed, what should I do?". Again there are too many occasions when Japanese Knotweed has been dumped inside an entrance gate and a machine has been sent in to "tidy" the site, resulting in the spread of the plant and the appearance of those well known pink shoots over wide areas and the request, "What should I do now?", to which there is no easy, cheap answer. Recognition of the fact that the plant can colonise fissures in foundations should inform any demolition strategy on an affected site, ensuring that non-contaminated above ground material is kept separate from potentially affected material below



ground, again reducing costs. Once the scale of the problem and the time available for treatment have been determined, appropriate treatment strategies can be considered. The Code of Practice produced by the Environment Agency catalogues a number of these. Good verification of materials brought onto site is a further important factor. Topsoil containing rhizome of the plant has produced unwanted surprises on a number of sites. It is far better to check material in a lorry butt or in a heap than when it is spread widely within a development. Remedial visits to deal with plants coming up through paving around drains or at a meeting point between materials can be an expensive and profit-reducing factor. Even in difficult economic times treatment on sites with the likelihood of development is likely to have a very favourable cost/benefit relationship.

Cornwall is often cited as having a particular problem with the plant and there is certainly some foundation to this with the number of extractive industries and the point that the area was, as one of the mildest parts of the British Isles, used as a testing area for newly imported species. However Cornwall is by no means the only area of the British Isles with the issue. Take a look around in your area! Perhaps a different viewpoint is greater awareness of the plant and its problems in Cornwall and a more comprehensive and targeted surveying and control programme than in many others.

Within the highway network in excess of 1800 sites are within the treatment programme, each being marked with a sign to make the public and contractors aware of the presence of the plant and with contact details for further information. The site is monitored for five years after the last observation of above ground material. Many of these sites are now in this last stage. Online information regarding known sites is available.

A forum was initiated in 1997, with many parties recognising the problems that the plant can cause both in the built and the wider environment. A wide variety of interests are represented and a number of strategies developed including the assessment of the urgency for action on particular sites, realising that the process takes time, co-ordination and effort.

When the forum put on a display at the Chelsea Flower Show warning of the problems that the plant can cause, Japanese Knotweed was noted in the grounds – and even a shoot approaching one of the show signs! There are few areas of the British Isles where the plant is not present and translocation of materials during the latter half of the twentieth century certainly spread it widely. Early awareness of the plant and a properly considered course of action rather than a knee jerk reaction to alarmist reports regarding the plant are of great benefit, both ecologically and financially.



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